

CUT VERSION

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The opera emerges in the sixteenth century with the aim of reviving the Ancient tragedy, in which music played an important role. In the very beginning of the dramatic scene, the Chorus entered on stage singing a choral passage, the *parodos*, and its verses in lyrical meters marked the characters' coming and going on stage, therefore functioning as limits to episodes. From Aeschylus to Euripides, the Chorus loses dramatic importance, although the music becomes more relevant. In fact, the characters increasingly sing lyrical passages (monodies and *κομμοί*¹), becoming the singing the privileged part to deal with passion, doubt, and despair. But we do not know much about the music of the Ancient Theatre.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the literary meetings of Count Giovanni de' Bardi, in 1576, and of Jacopo Conti, in 1592, tried to recover the musical perfection of the Antiquity, discussing the Aristotelian principles and defending the accompanied monody. Although these discussions at Count Bardi's have not been musically fruitful, they initiate a debate that is in the origin of the opera composition. To revitalise the Attic tragedy implied, on the one hand, the enrichment of the dramatic text with melody and, on the other hand, to keep the word's intelligibility. And this discussion never abandoned the opera. It has caused disputes, movements, rivalries, schools and reforms throughout the centuries. And this is an issue which has its roots in the Antiquity.

Influenced by the Camerata's ideals and by Peri's *Euridice* (1600), Claudio Monteverdi interchanging accompanied monody with polyphony, displayed a deep knowledge of the Ancient authors in his dramas. His first opera, entitled *L'Orfeo* (1607), with a

¹ Aristotle defines *κομμοί* as a "moaning singing sang by the chorus and by the scene altogether" ("κομμός δὲ θρήνος κοινός χοροῦ καὶ ἀπὸ σκηνῆς", Arist., *Po.* 1452 b).

Striggio's libretto, has an Aristotelian structure – a prologue and five acts – and has a Chorus, dancing and singing as the Chorus in the Greek Theatre.

The two goals of defending the revitalisation of the Ancient Theatre in the fifteenth century were to raise pleasure and reflection, a discussion that moves back to Aristotle, who included the music in the liberal studies curriculum, among the reading and the writing (*γράμματα*), the gymnastics (*γυμναστική*) and the drawing (*γραφική*). To Aristotle music is a kind of knowledge that it aims to make people “spend time” *διαγωγή* and to “rationalise” *φρόνησις*². This subject has divided the opera composers, who were conscious of the relevance of the story and of the spectacular element, inseparable components on stage.

The title of Antonio Salieri's *divertimento teatrale* “prima la musica, e poi le parole” “First the music, then the words”, is clear about which one, in his perspective, is privileged. Salieri preferred the grand spectacle of the Italian *bel canto*, which proved, in the eighteenth century, the failure of the mainly intellectual theories of the sixteenth century literary meetings. In Rome and Venice emerged a new audience of rich artisans who were charmed by the vocal virtuosity of the interpreters. The theoretical relationships between poetry and music were not relevant to them. Therefore, the Baroque opera, both from Venice and from Naples, has become a popular spectacle. The themes were mainly based on mythology and Ancient history, which pleased the audience by their intense situations, lived by the characters, and by the sequences of events, filled with spectacular and fantastic scenes – battles, shipwrecks, fires.

The same libretto originated several operas. The almost thirty “poems” that Metastasio wrote inspired more than one thousand scores during the eighteenth century. The ephemerality of plays and the improvisation dominated. The so-called opera-aria was based on a bipartite structure that solved the conflict between the melody and the text, by making the recitative the moment of the action development, and the aria the vehicle of the expression of emotions. It was the vocal exhibitionism that attracted the audience. Antonio Vivaldi composed a few operas following these canons, as the *L'incoronazione di Dario* (1717).

In England, Händel, a German born composer, who became British citizen in 1726, immersed in the *opera seria*'s world. He wrote several operas based on Ancient history:

² Η πρὸς διαγωγὴν τι συμβάλλεται καὶ πρὸς φρόνησιν, Arist. *Pol.* 1339a.

Nero, lost; *Agrippina* (1709), *Alessandro* (1719), *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (1724), among others. The action was intended to highlight the singers' vocal virtuosity. But the composer shows a dramatic progress in the manipulation of musical forms. He employs popular rhythms, as the gavotte or the gigue, to swift the arias, but it is to the recitatives accompanied by the orchestra he gives more attention.

In France, where the second opera pole was located, Lully's genius dominated throughout the sixteenth century. Jean-Baptiste Lully had the *Théâtre en Musique* monopoly. In Paris, the Italian *bel canto*, which had invaded Germany and mainly Vienna, did not triumph. The French audience, who has never accepted the *castrati* in their theatres, was not seduced by the singers' virtuosity. Perhaps the presence of the recited theatre has led to the emergence of a more demanding spectacle as far as its story is concerned.

The search for a logical musical development for the narrative has been the beginning of the *tragédie en musique* or the *tragédie lyrique*, created by Lully, for which a lot has probably contributed his collaboration with Molière and Corneille. Concerning the plots, Lully's opera production confirms the common preference for the classical mythology.

An English composer and Lully's contemporaneous, Henri Purcell wrote music for stage works. He is between the Italian and the French traditions. The opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) has a libretto from Nahum Tate and it bases on the book forth of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Although it derives from the courtly masque tradition, the work shows the composer's strong sense of drama, in displaying the depths of emotion.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, an Austrian composer, Christoph Willibald Gluck was having a great success in *opera seria*, for which he used Metastasio's texts. But when he met in Vienna the choreographer Gasparo Angiolini and the librettist Ranieri de' Calzabigi, who intended to take Metastasio's place, he began a new path. This path emerges from the conciliation between the French opera and the Italian vocal melody and the German orchestral magnificence. We are before the reform opera, which has in *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1662) its first expression.

Always bearing in mind the music's subjection to the text, Gluck uses the opera opening to prepare the action, in which the choral mass also starts to participate. Although it is not supposed to revive the spirit of the Attic theatre by bringing into stage the Greek

tragedy – as defended by the literary meetings of the sixteenth century – the reform opera gets closer to the Antiquity both for the action unity and for the themes choice.

The proximity between Gluck's aesthetics and the Greek theatre is a reality not only because the Antiquity is recreated by crossing texts and influences, but also because the mythic story is told with an extreme dramatic economy. In fact, the action unity defended by the composer inserts his opera in the Ancient canons. The librettos lose Lully's plays typical fantastic characteristics, following a line of a bigger simplicity, without multiplying characters or intrigues, and eliminating the prologue. There is a dramatic crescendo until the climax in the play's end.

[TRUNCATED: ANALISIS OF GLUCK'S ALCESTIS]

If the music audition is enriched when we read the Ancient authors, with no doubt we became closer to the Antiquity when we hear music.